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The Siren Reborn: Femme Fatale in 'Basic Instinct', 'Species', 'Mr. and Mrs. Smith'  
and 'Gone Girl'

**Abstract:** The archetypal fatal woman, otherwise termed as the femme fatale, can be regarded as a concept that attempts to dismantle the power structures of patriarchy. It poses a threat to the patriarchal hegemony by shattering the foundations upon which the age old customs and traditions have been built, forcing generations to internalize the chauvinist regimes. In the phallogentric Western metaphysics, woman's voice was treated as an abnormality. When women voiced their objections to abuse and discrimination, it was relegated to either hysteria or heresy. The femme fatale, on the other hand, projects the dominant archetype who will have her way by employing different measures. She is the 'Medusa' or the 'Vamp' who will indulge in all sorts of pleasures to manipulate the thoughts of men. The fatal woman transforms her body into an aid to achieve her goals. The charming enchantress thus embarks on a journey of subversion of the patriarchal centre, and challenges the symbolic law. Instead of whining and protesting, she cleverly objectifies her own body and makes the ogling droolers pay for letting their guards down. This paper examines femme fatale as an instance of women's acceptance of their identity as the source of strength which is employed to break the manacles of patriarchy. The characters Catherine Trammell in *Basic Instinct*, Jane Smith in *Mr. & Mrs. Smith*, Amy Dunne in *Gone Girl* and Sil in *Species* are all femme fatale in this

respect Each character explores various possibilities and intricacies arising from the manipulation of the social norms and constraints circumscribing the lives of women.

Keywords: Binaries, Femme Fatale, gender, hegemony, patriarchy

## 1. Introduction

The world is perceived by the human mind in terms of binary oppositions. That is the sole reason for the power relations between almost everything in the universe, thus state the Structuralist and the Poststructuralist school of thinkers. The concept of binary opposition works best at the level of gender. The power centered patriarchy frames the world we live in and places women at the margins. Women are thus supposed to be meek, gentle, docile and subservient. This is where the dominant woman archetype, the femme fatale is to be placed in juxtaposition. She is the woman who shakes the foundations of patriarchy by celebrating her sexuality and body. The femme fatale dismantles the meekness and coyness attributed to woman by patriarchy and reinforces all the feminine traits to establish a more powerful version of the female. She is the solution to subvert the patriarchal hegemony that is forced upon generations, a tradition of deep rooted sexism and suppression imposed on women by men.

However, this magnificent archetype is never allowed to flourish through literature and often such representations are cleverly destroyed by the internalized ideology of the patriarchal regime. Taking the case of movies, this can be analyzed when the femme fatale is ultimately forced to succumb to defeat or worse, death. The 1995 American movie, *Species* destroys its femme fatale, Sil, as she is seen as a 'threat to humanity'. In *Mr. and Mrs. Smith* (2005), Jane Smith goes back to a domestic life, giving up her femme fatale role of an

assassin. The films *Basic Instinct* (1992) and *Gone Girl* (2014) however, leave open ended possibility of the femme fatale domination over men as they end.

## 2. The Femme Fatale

The trajectory of the dominant woman archetype can be traced from long back, when she appeared as the siren, the medusa, the water nymph and even in the Eastern concepts such as Mohini. This archetype has been both the favourite as well as the offending character from a male-oriented perspective. However, it must be admitted that the fatal woman is often regarded as possessing supernatural powers that are capable of manipulating men like a puppeteer who draws the strings of men's attitude in ways she desire. She is the charming enchantress who has taken control of men through her incomparable beauty and sexuality. She projects an image of the alluring woman capable of mysterious magic. She turns fatal when her victims are led on to commit crimes that she has brilliantly executed by making them her medium. The entire process is analogous to a grand master playing a game of chess, where the pawns are men lured by her charm, held spellbound.

The French term for it, the 'femme fatale' has gained currency upon the character taking shape in films rather than in other forms of literature and art. The femme fatale has been the manipulative dominant archetypal woman inclined to lead men astray for the sake of fulfilling her aims and motives. The strong female character was thus portrayed as the 'key to the forbidden fruit', attributing a taint of villainy to her super manipulative skills of alluring men to make them puppets to her aid. However through such misinterpretations the patriarchal hegemony have so far been suppressing the strong and powerful personality within the marginalized. As writing was male produced and the consumers mostly men, and they consumed preposterous ideas and notions about femininity, tradition and culture, it was deeply internalized by the women community as well. As Betty Friedan points out in her

essay *The Feminine Mystique*, "... there was no word of this yearning in the million words written about women, for women, in all the columns, books and articles by experts telling women their role was to seek fulfillment as wives and mothers." (Friedan, 1963. p. 15)

This resulted in the rising discontent of women over their domestic lives confined within the four walls constructed by patriarchy, shaping her into a traditional housewife to look after her husband and children and find fulfillment in motherhood.

The femme fatale breaks the binary notion that instills the gender polarity in the minds of generations. The relation between man and masculinity and woman and femininity was after all a binary construct instigated and established by patriarchy. Femme fatale however, behaves in an unnatural way breaking all the conventions of feminine docility and meekness.

Consequently, it is appropriate that the femme fatale is represented as the antithesis of maternal – sterile or barren...the power accorded to the femme fatale is a function of fears linked to the notions of uncontrollable drives, the fading of subjectivity and the loss of conscious agency... (Doane, 1991. p. 2)

According to Mary Ann Doane, the femme fatale concept is an antithesis of the maternal woman. She connects the femme fatale with the unconscious propounded by the psychoanalysts, as a kind of awakening of the unconscious of a woman and what follows as her attempt to fill the lack she undergoes through patriarchal constraints.

### 3. The Four Films

For a long time woman's voice is treated as an abnormality and often categorized as heresy or hysteria. The femme fatale on the other hand being a dominant personality, speaks through her sexuality and beauty. The treatment of woman's protest as an abnormality can be traced in the film *Species* that presents a strong woman character as 'alien', or an 'experiment

gone astray'. *Species* is a film where the concept of femme fatale is almost celebrated but also by provokingly placing the fatal woman an alien, turns it into a failure at the end that demands her annihilation. Sil is an alien who seduces men to engage in sexual intercourse with her for procreation. She aims at multiplying as fast as she can and hasten the invasion of the planet. While she has superhuman qualities and great physical strength, the very fact that she is an alien places the whole point of the femme fatale in an ironic vein. The supposed dominant archetype is made to seem humanly impossible through such a representation. The filmmakers could possibly be destroying the archetype or rather confining the scope of the character within the cliché ending that is the failure of the femme fatale or, in this case, death. It is an instance of the patriarchal power structure betraying intolerance over female dominance, going around manipulating men that way. The scientists work on a genetic experiment by splicing an alien DNA with a human DNA. They choose female DNA for the experiment assuming that a female would possess 'docile' and 'controllable' traits. As this assumption is contradicted and proved wrong by Sil, as she turns uncontrollable as well as dangerous, they kill her.

In *Mr. and Mrs. Smith*, John and Jane are assassins of the best category. Jane's mode of action is of the femme fatale, luring her prey using her charms and snapping his neck. She best represents the femme fatale when she wears the outfit of dominatrix and kills her 'client'. In this movie, the undercurrent is to establish a balance between the male and the female protagonists. There is an increased tendency to equate the 'macho' John smith to the ultra-sexy Jane smith who objectifies her own body and employs it to carry out her assassin tasks. However this movie culminates with Jane abandoning the assassin life to embark her journey on a new domestic life. This shows the intentional pacifying of a strong woman character and transforming her into a more socially acceptable traditional woman whose

prime priority becomes her family. This tendency is another instance of the intolerance towards the freedom of woman to choose a life she desires.

The movie *Gone Girl*, is an epic femme fatale tale, that deals with the intriguing schemes that a woman, a wife sets up to trap her infidel husband and frame him as her murderer. Nick Dunne is a usual bored husband who turns to another girl when his marriage becomes less satisfactory and complicated with infertility. The irresponsible Nick is taught a lesson by his wife.

You'd think I'd let him destroy me and end up happier than ever? ... He needed to learn. Grown-ups work for things. Grown-ups pay. Grown-ups suffer consequences.  
(Fincher, 2014.)

She devises a brilliant plan to teach Nick a lesson, to make him learn the price of cheating. After all the troubles they have been through, his infidelity agitates her which transforms her into the femme fatale that manipulates Nick's life and turns it into a pandemonium. She breaks the stigma of the drunkard husband who beats up the wife, and creates a new dimension for suffering. It is Amy who makes Nick's life a living hell. The terminology used in the movie to describe Amy Dunne, the femme fatale, is significant. Nick calls her wife's character 'complicated', through which he attempts to establish her as a bitch (as his twin sister Margo openly tells). There are various instances in the movie where such lewd expressions are used to describe Amy. This depicts how language plays a key role in the representation of the dominant woman as an anomaly that does not fit into the constructed framework of an ideal woman.

*Basic Instinct* is the most symbolic film that depicts a true femme fatale representation with all its intricacies. Catherine Trammell plays with the mind of the detectives and the viewer alike, arousing suspicion regarding the credibility of her character. She is the master puppeteer who controls the thought process of the numerous characters and

twists the truth in a way that renders the lie into a believable reality. Apart from Elizabeth Garner nobody realizes her true identity and diabolic nature, not even the viewer. She executes a good number of killings and gets away with it owing to her impeccable scheming. A double major in psychology and literature, she is well aware of the currents of the human mind and puts this knowledge into best use. Among all the four women discussed in the paper, Catherine Trammell is the epitome of femme fatale. Her obsession with the ice pick induces fear and anticipation in Nick as well as the spectator. *Basic Instinct* not only celebrates the concept of femme fatale, but like *Gone Girl*, subverts the patriarchal hegemony to a great extent.

#### 4. Conclusion

The rebirth of the siren can be envisioned in the celebration of the femme fatale in movies of this type. However it also depicts how woman cannot be free from the manacles of patriarchal constraints, though they are already rusted. Patriarchal hegemony is extremely deep rooted that, uprooting it is an almost impossible task. It has taken roots not only in the minds of men but women as well. The femme fatale attempts to put a toe out of the line and she is faced with defeat or death. It is through this that the patriarchs celebrate their superiority over the 'second sex'. She is after all 'the wrong woman' or the 'temptress' who is inclined to use men and lead them astray. Even the movies are not free from such practices of 'disruption of the equilibrium' where the equilibrium is maintained by the suppression of woman and her relegation into the 'second sex'. One can only hope that a time will come when the struggle for domination is forgone and peace is established between the sexes.

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